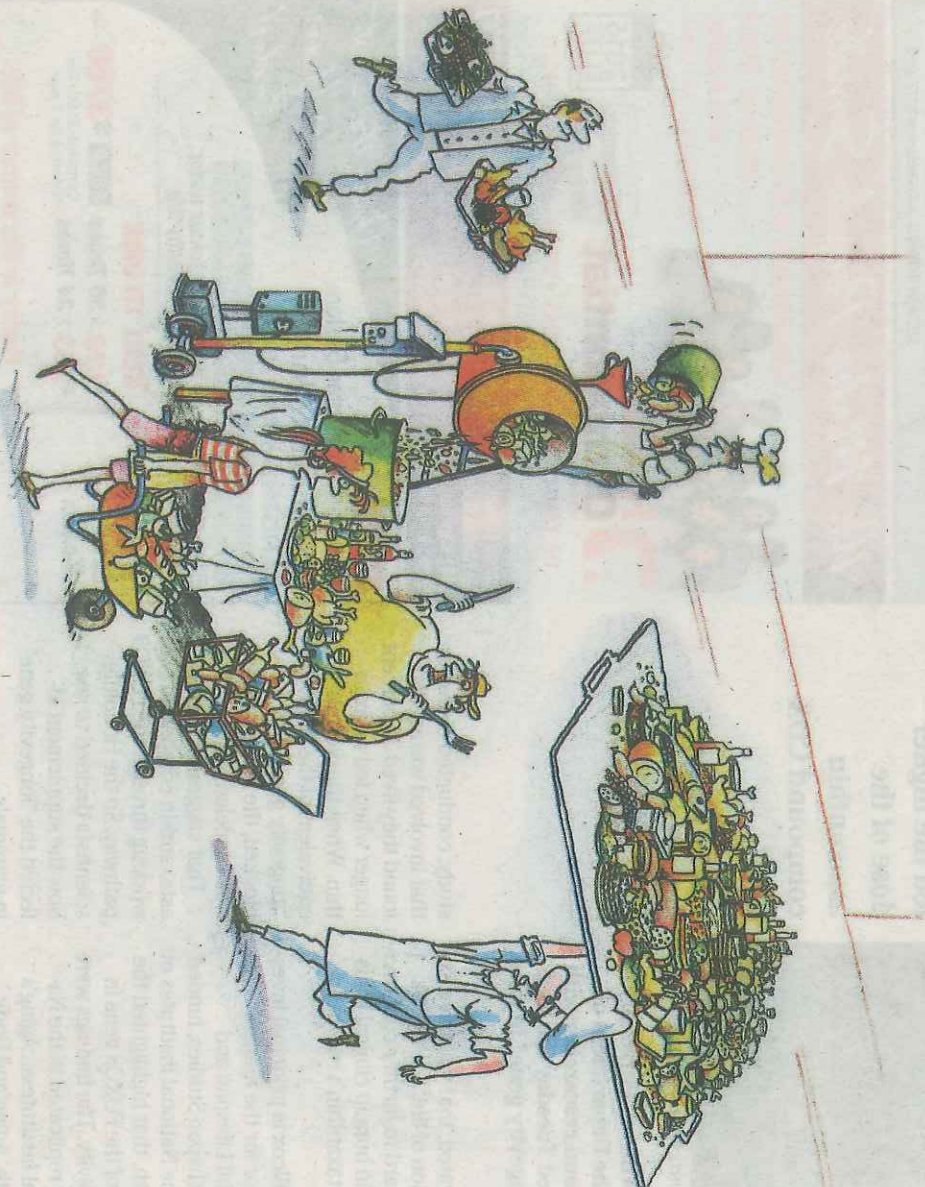


INSIGHT



# We used to talk about music, but now it's food

*What we eat has become our major source of entertainment*

By Tyler Cowen

Since the 1960s and '70s, food has replaced music's centrality to American culture. These are invariably somewhat subjective impressions, but I'd like to lay out my sense of how the social impact of music has fallen and the social role of food has risen.

In the earlier era, new albums were eagerly awaited and bought in the hundreds of thousands immediately upon their release. Diversity in the musical world was relatively low, as genres such as rap, heavy metal, techno and ambient either didn't exist or weren't well developed. It was also harder to access the music of the more distant past — no Spotify or YouTube — and thus people listened to the same common music more frequently.

That was by no means a good deal for every listener in terms of pleasure, but it did give music a powerful social influence. Bob Dylan, the Beatles and various forms of hippie music shaped political debates, introduced many people to drugs or long hair, and were a touchstone for the age. With the possible exception of Kendrick Lamar, musicians today don't have comparable ideological reach. Taylor Swift's paradigm of the nonpolitical, intellectually generic pop star, and it was mostly a nonevent when Kanye West endorsed Donald Trump for president. In contrast to the past, today's pop hardly ever cites literary sources, a sign of its relatively generic content. Furthermore, pop is holding steady, and rock 'n' roll is on the decline.

THE RHYTHMIC, propulsive and sometimes dissonant nature of cutting-edge music in the 1960s and '70s often impelled us to get up and do something. Both black and white music were central to the civil-rights era and the protests against the Vietnam War, and Pete Seeger's "We Shall Overcome" was known to millions of Americans. These days, streaming has replaced music ownership, and so music is less of a source of identity and social connection. Teenagers and

20-somethings signal their affiliations with social media, so music's bonding function has diminished significantly, along with much of its political power. The big political struggles of the last 15 years, whether over the Iraq War or Obamacare, just weren't that closely tied to music.

Most of the top music from the 1990s, such as say Alanis Morissette, would sound current if released today, a sign of cultural stasis in what was once a highly socially charged and rapidly changing sector. In 1967, music from 20 or even 10 years earlier sounded quite different and indeed archaic.

AS FOR WHERE the change and innovation have come, it's hard to think of any sphere of American life where the selection and quality have improved so much as food, whether in the supermarket or in restaurants. American cities become more interesting places to dine each year, and the attention paid to food on TV and online has been growing steadily since the 1990s.

Restaurants are increasingly an organizing and revitalizing force in our cities, and eating out has continued to rise as a means of socializing. America's educated professional class may be out of touch with sports and tired of discussing the weather, and so trading information about new or favorite restaurants, or recipes and ingredients, has become one of the new all-purpose topics of conversation. Food is a relatively gender-neutral topic, and furthermore immigrant newcomers can be immediately proud of what they know and have eaten.

But, in spite of my own rather passionate connection to the food world, I consider this a Faustian bargain because it reflects, and may to some extent be inducing, what I elsewhere have described as a complacency and a slowing down of cultural change.

Music made us get up and dance, or occasionally throw a rock. Food, especially if combined with wine, encourages a state of satiety and re-

pose. Most conversation about food is studiously nonpolitical and removed from controversial social issues. There is a layer of left-wing critique of food corporations, genetic modification and food-associated pollution, but its impact on broader American culture has been marginal. These days, it could be said that food is the opiate of the educated classes. Anecdotally, I observe that the contemporary preoccupation with a particular kind of food fanciness and diversity has penetrated black communities less, and those are also the groups where music might in some cases remain politically important.

Otherwise, the contemporary food world grants diners the ability to cite a multicultural allegiance without controversy. One can mention a taste for Senegalese food, and with credibility for sophistication and worldliness, as well as knowledge of Africa. At the same time, one isn't pinned down to having to defend any other specific feature of Senegalese culture. Maffa — usually a meat in peanut and tomato sauce — isn't that controversial or revolutionary as a concept.

THE CURRENT culinary touchstone is the foodie or TV host who "eats everything," from pig snouts to worms to scorpions. Cannibalism aside, the list of what has been consumed on television is now so long it's hard to shock viewers (not only do some insects taste like potato chips, but in some dining circles consuming potato chips is arguably the more rebellious act). The more prosaic truth, however, is that eating everything is not much of a revolution. If anything, historical resonance has been achieved by people who refused to eat certain foods, whether the underlying doctrine was vegetarianism, Jainism, Judaism or Islam.

I like to think music might win back its social and intellectual resonance, but in the meantime please pass me the green mango chili fish sauce.

Tyler Cowen writes for *Bloomberg Views*.